



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

# Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS)

## Inspection Findings 2020 - 2022

Inspectorate  
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# 1. Introduction

In March 2020, the Government closed school buildings and requested that schools mediate remote teaching and learning as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When school buildings reopened in September 2020, it became a national priority to ensure that they were safe learning and working environments for all. In order to assist schools and centres for education realise this priority, the Department of Education issued detailed guidance to support the safe and sustainable provision of schooling<sup>1</sup>. The guidance was based on the advice provided by health authorities, including the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), and was subject to ongoing review. The guidance was customised for schools in consultation with the education partners and it provided key messages to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, pupils/students, families and the wider community while recognising the importance of sustaining the operation of schools for the health and wellbeing of pupils/students and of society as a whole.

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education played a role in supporting schools in implementing the guidance and in providing assurance to the public that schools were a safe working and learning environment for all. The Inspectorate did this in three main ways:

- Through carrying out a programme of inspection visits to schools to provide advice and support in the implementation of the Department's guidelines. These inspection visits were referred to as *Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS)* visits. In total 2,641 SSPS inspections visits took place between the introduction of the SSPS model and its conclusion in March 2022.
- Through conducting a programme of advisory sessions with schools designed to support the implementation of the Department's advice to schools
- Through conducting focus groups, surveys and advisory group discussions with children and young people from primary and post-primary schools and centres for education.

This report focuses on the development of the SSPS model and the outcomes of the SSPS inspection visits.

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<sup>1</sup> The guidance for primary and special schools is [here](#) and the guidance for post-primary schools and centres for education is [here](#).

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## 2. SSPS inspections

### 2.1 Developing the SSPS inspection model

In May 2020, the Government mandated the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) to develop Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with Inspectorates in other government departments to monitor the implementation of the [Return to Work Protocol](#).

The MoU developed between the Department of Education and the HSA facilitated cooperation between the HSA and the Department in the interest of ensuring implementation of the Department's COVID-19 Response Plans for schools. The MoU committed the Department's Inspectorate to monitoring schools' compliance with the COVID-19 Response Plans and to assisting schools to address any non-compliance issues arising.

In September 2020, following the signing of the MoU, developmental work began on the SSPS model. From the beginning, the Inspectorate was committed to adopting a partnership approach to the development of the model as it recognised that all schools were learning and adjusting as they recommenced onsite teaching and learning.

Initially, the Inspectorate developed an overview of areas of the Department's guidelines that inspectors could monitor during visits, which were then discussed with School Governance Section of the Department and the HSA. This formed the initial framework for the inspection visits.

An initial briefing of all education partners was held to explain the aims, purpose and key features of the proposed visits. Following consideration of the feedback received at the consultation meeting, the Inspectorate carried out the first phase of visits in just over 40 schools and centres for education<sup>2</sup>. During these visits inspectors used the initial inspection framework and discussed it and the findings with the principal of each school. Feedback was provided to the principal and to the lead worker representative(s) (LWRs) at the end of each visit and their feedback was sought on their experience of the visit.

Following the initial round of visits, the framework was adjusted and a second meeting was held with stakeholder organisations. During this engagement, the stakeholders were informed about the findings of the initial visits and their views were

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<sup>2</sup> 21 primary schools, 18 post-primary schools, 1 special school and 1 centre for education were involved in the initial phase.

sought about how to undertake such visits in a broader sample of schools. In late October 2020, a second round of visits was conducted in 46 schools and centres for education<sup>3</sup>.

A final meeting of the stakeholders was held in November 2020 at which the Inspectorate shared experiences from the second phase of visits and outlined its plans to finalise the inspection model and publish the reports arising from the inspection visits<sup>4</sup>. Oral and written submissions were invited from stakeholders and the final [Guide to the Safe Provision of Schooling Inspection visits](#) was approved by the Minister for Education in January 2021.

The *Guide* set out how SSPS inspection visits were to be conducted and included the full framework of inspection checks.

## 2.2 Aims of SSPS inspection visits

The aims of the SSPS visits were to:

- support school leaders and boards of management as they implemented the COVID-19 Response Plan for the Safe and Sustainable Operation of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools<sup>5</sup>
- inform the Department of the challenges of implementing the COVID-19 Response Plan
- provide a public assurance that the COVID-19 Response Plan was being implemented by school authorities
- report to the Department on the extent to which the COVID-19 Response Plan was being implemented in the sample of schools inspected
- fulfil the Inspectorate's commitments emerging from the Memorandum of Understanding between the Health and Safety Authority and the Department of Education.

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<sup>3</sup> 32 primary schools, 10 post-primary schools 2 special schools and 2 centres for education were involved in the second round of the trial.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to this the reports were issued to the school but not published as the model had not been approved by the Minister

<sup>5</sup> Initially published as the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable Reopening of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools.

## 2.3 SSPS inspection framework

The SSPS inspection framework contains four main areas:

1. Planning
2. Appointment of a Lead Worker Representative (LWR)
3. Provision of staff training
4. Implementation of control measures

Each main area had a number of checks. The checks were the overall actions that a school was required to take under the Department's COVID-19 Response Plan. Each check was further divided into a number of sub-checks. The sub-checks were the specific actions that schools were required to take in order to be fully compliant with the main check. Table 1 provides an example of a check for area 4 as well as the four associated sub-checks:

IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTROL MEASURES	
<b>Check:</b>	The school has procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools
<b>Sub-Checks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The school principal and the LWR are aware of the procedures for dealing with a suspected case</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An isolation area is ready</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact telephone numbers for parents are available</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The school has a supply of PPE available</li> </ul>

Table 1: One check and the four sub-checks in area 4 of the Inspection Framework.

During an SSPS inspection, the inspector determined whether a school was compliant or not compliant with each of the sub-checks on the framework. The full framework is provided in [Appendix 1](#).

## 2.4 SSPS inspection activities

Inspectors engaged in a range of activities during SSPS visits.

Before the inspection, typically 24 hours, schools received a courtesy phone call indicating when the inspector was planning to visit the school. The inspector outlined the documents required for the visit and outlined the engagements to be held during the visit. The school's COVID-19 protocols were acknowledged.

During the inspection visit, the inspector reviewed the school's COVID-19 policy statement, COVID-19 risk assessment and the school's contact log. The inspector

engaged with the principal, lead worker representative(s) (LWR(s)) and a selection of staff members. The inspector observed the physical distancing arrangements in a selection of classrooms and social areas, COVID-19 signage, sanitising units, isolation area, PPE equipment, the staff room and a selection of areas outside of classrooms. In line with all inspection models, child protection checks were also undertaken during the visit.

Oral feedback was provided to the principal and the LWR(s) at the end of the visit and a report on the visit was published on the Department's website.

In August 2021, all schools were provided with CO2 monitors by the Department as part of the suite of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. During all SSPS visits conducted after September 2021, inspectors checked that schools had received their CO2 monitors and were aware of the guidance available to support their effective use. Where a school had not received its monitor(s), the inspector followed up with the Planning and Building Unit of the Department to ensure that this was addressed.

On a weekly basis, the Inspectorate provided data on compliance levels found during SSPS inspections to the Department of An Taoiseach.

## 2.5 SSPS Inspection findings

SSPS Inspection Findings					
	Total visits	Fully compliant with all checks (Count and percentage)		Not fully compliant with all checks (Count and percentage)	
Primary/Special Schools	1,843	1,802	97.7%	41	2.3%
Post-primary/Centres for education	798	774	96.9%	24	3.1%
<b>Totals in count and percentages</b>	<b>2,641</b>	<b>2,576</b>	<b>97.5%</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>2.5%</b>

Table 2: Overall inspection findings SSPS Inspections 2020 - 2022

The Inspectorate conducted 2,641 SSPS visits in total. 1,843 were conducted in primary and special schools and the remaining 798 were conducted in post-primary schools and centres for education. Over half of all primary and special schools (56.8%) received an SSPS visit and almost all post-primary schools and centres for education (92.3%) received an SSPS visit.

The inspection findings indicate that almost all schools were fully compliant with all checks. In total, 1,802 schools (97.7%) were fully compliant. 1,802 of these were primary or special schools and 774 were post-primary schools or centres for education.

The main aspects of non-compliance were as follows:

- The school's / centre's health and safety risk assessment did not adequately include COVID-19 as a risk and did not identify associated control measures.
- The school/centre had not made adequate changes to the school/centre and classroom layout to support physical distancing.
- Teachers and other staff and pupils/students were not wearing face coverings in line with DE guidance.
- The members of school staff were not aware of the identity of the Lead Worker representative (LWR) and the LWR could not confirm that (s)he received protected time to fulfil his/her duties in line with DE guidelines.
- A contact log was not maintained for visitors.
- The school's COVID-19 policy did not contain, at a minimum, the commitments set out in Appendix 1 of the COVID-19 Response Plan.
- The school principal and the LWR could not confirm that they were familiar with the revised COVID-19 Response Plan.

In total 65 schools (2.5%) were not fully compliant with all checks conducted during the inspection. In these 65 schools, there were 76 occurrences of non-compliance with the sub-checks of the framework, as a small number of schools were not compliant with more than one check. In all cases of non-compliance, the inspector engaged with the school to ensuring that the aspects of non-compliance were successfully addressed.

The individual checks that schools were found to be non-compliant with are provided in table 3 below.



<b>SSPS visits: Areas and Checks that schools were not compliant with</b>	<b>No. of occurrences of non-compliance (N = 76)</b>	<b>Percentage of non-compliance</b>
<b>AREA 1: Planning</b>		
The school has a COVID-19 policy in place.	6	7.9%
The school has updated its health and safety risk assessment to identify the hazards and outlined the relevant control measures associated with COVID-19.	18	23.8%
<b>AREA 2: Appointment of a Lead Work Representative</b>		
The school has appointed a Lead Worker Representative.	9	11.8%
<b>AREA 3: Provision for staff training</b>		
The school has ensured that staff have reviewed the training materials provided by the Department of Education.	3	3.9%
All staff have completed a Return to Work (RTW) form.	4	5.4%
<b>AREA 4: Control measures</b>		
The school has procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools.	9	11.8%
The school has displayed posters and other signage to prevent introduction and spread of COVID-19.	1	1.3%
The school has made changes to the school and classroom layout to support physical distancing and to facilitate ongoing cleaning of the school in line with section 5.4 of the Department guidelines.	14	18.4%
The school has made necessary arrangements to limit access to the school to necessary visitors and maintain records of contacts to the school.	9	11.8%
The school principal confirmed that enhanced cleaning arrangements that reflect the Department's guidance are in place.	3	3.9%
<b>Total occurrences of non-compliance</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3: Occurrences of non-compliance found during SSPS inspections

## **2.6 School responses to the SSPS reports**

Schools were provided with an opportunity to provide a response to the SSPS inspection report prior to its publication. 15.6% of schools provided a response. A sample of school responses (SRs) was examined in preparing this report. The majority of school responses welcomed the external inspection process and the advice received during the engagement. The responses also indicated that schools welcomed the affirmations of practice provided and pledged that the school community would continue to ensure a safe school environment for all. In a number of instances, the school used the school response to acknowledge the efforts of the principal, staff and entire school community in implementing the Department's guidelines and in supporting the wellbeing of pupils and staff during the pandemic. In instances where occurrences of non-compliance had been identified during the inspection visit, the school response accepted the recommendations made in the report and reported that the school had now taken action to address the issues highlighted during the inspection visit. These actions included the introduction of a contact tracing log and the ratification of relevant school policies by the board of management.

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## 3. Conclusion

While the effectiveness of the SSPS model has not been formally evaluated, the evidence of the compliance data and the responses to the inspection visits by schools and by inspectors suggests that the model was an effective means of supporting school leaders and boards of management as they implemented the COVID-19 Response Plan.

The collaborative nature of the development of the SSPS inspection model ensured that school communities and education partners were fully involved in the development of the inspection framework. This was a key factor in the successful implementation of the SSPS model.

This development and implementation of the model was also characterised by cooperation between School Governance Section, Planning and Building Unit and the Inspectorate. This was instrumental in helping various sections of the Department to understand the challenges of implementing the Response Plan.

The provision of a published report at the end of the inspection visit and the reporting of compliance data arising from the inspections to other Government Departments enabled the Department of Education to provide a public assurance that schools were implementing the COVID-19 Response Plan.

## 4. Appendix 1: SSPS Inspection Framework

PLANNING	
<b>1</b>	The school has a COVID-19 policy <sup>6</sup> in place
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The policy contains, at a minimum, the commitments set out in Appendix 1 of the COVID -19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools</li> </ul>
<b>b.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is evidence that the policy was shared with staff, pupils/students and parents</li> </ul>
<b>c.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school principal and Lead Worker Representative (LWR) confirm that they are familiar with the revised COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Post-Primary / Primary and Special Schools</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	The school has updated its health and safety risk assessment to identify the hazards and outlining the relevant control measures associated with COVID-19
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school's risk assessment includes COVID-19 as a risk and identifies associated control measures</li> </ul>
APPOINTMENT OF A LEAD WORKER REPRESENTATIVE	
<b>3</b>	The school has appointed a Lead Worker Representative
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The name of LWR(s) is available<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
<b>b.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit were aware of the identity of the LWR</li> </ul>
<b>c.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A discussion with LWR(s) shows that he/she is aware of the role and responsibilities of a LWR(s) as outlined in Appendix 8 of the COVID -19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools</li> </ul>
<b>d.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The LWR(s) confirms that he/she has completed training for LWRs</li> </ul>
<b>e.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The LWR confirmed that (s)he receives protected time, in line with DE guidelines, to enable them to carry out their duties in that role</li> </ul>
PROVISION FOR STAFF TRAINING	
<b>4</b>	The school has ensured that staff have reviewed the training materials provided by the Department of Education
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirm that they have completed relevant training</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	All staff have completed a Return to Work (RTW) form
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The principal confirmed that all staff have completed a RTW form</li> </ul>
<b>b.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirmed that they completed a RTW form</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> This may be referred to as the school's COVID-19 Response Plan

<sup>7</sup> In post-primary schools with more than 40 staff, a second Lead Worker Representative should be appointed. In schools with two LWRs inspectors should meet with **both LWRs** where possible. In primary schools with less than 30 staff, a Deputy lead Worker Representative will be appointed in addition to the LWR.

In schools with 30 or more staff and in all Special Schools, an Assistant Lead Worker Representative will be appointed in addition to the LWR

<b>CONTROL MEASURES</b>	
<b>6</b>	The school has procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school principal and the LWR are aware of the procedures for dealing with a suspected case</li> </ul>
<b>b.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An isolation area is ready</li> </ul>
<b>c.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact telephone numbers for parents are available</li> </ul>
<b>d.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school has a supply of PPE available</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	The school has displayed posters and other signage to prevent introduction and spread of COVID-19
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is visual evidence of posters and signage throughout the school</li> </ul>
<b>8</b>	The school has made changes to the school and classroom layout to support physical distancing and to facilitate ongoing cleaning of the school in line with section 5.4 of the Department guidelines
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is visual evidence of reconfigured classrooms that take account of the minimum physical distancing requirements</li> </ul>
<b>b.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A sanitising station is available at the main entry and exit points to the school</li> </ul>
<b>c.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sanitising stations are available at regular intervals throughout the school</li> </ul>
<b>d.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers, other staff and students wear face coverings in line with current DE guidance/requirements</li> </ul>
<b>e.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visitors to the school are requested to wear face coverings</li> </ul>
<b>f.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school has measures in place to decrease interaction and increase physical distancing outside of classrooms</li> </ul>
<b>g.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrangements are in place to facilitate physical distancing in the staff room</li> </ul>
<b>h.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are measures in place for good ventilation that take account of current DE guidance/requirements</li> </ul>
<b>9</b>	The school has made necessary arrangements to limit access to the school to necessary visitors and maintain records of contacts to the school
<b>a.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A contact Log is maintained for visitors</li> </ul>
<b>10</b>	The school principal confirmed that enhanced cleaning arrangements that reflect the Department's guidance are in place